

Why Kaddafi Never Made It to Englewood and the Libyan UN Ambassador's 27 Year Presence in Englewood, New Jersey

By Congressman Steve Rothman (D-NJ)

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Rabbi Shmuley Boteach recently posted an article on The Huffington Post that was picked up by several other media outlets that completely misrepresented a situation important to the people of Englewood, New Jersey. Englewood is in my Congressional District, I was born there and served as its mayor from 1983 to 1989.

In January of 2000, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach purchased an Englewood, New Jersey house directly next door to the Libyan government's mansion, knowing (as he acknowledged in an August 20, 2009 Jerusalem Post column) that, "when I [Boteach] moved into our home ten years ago that the property adjoining ours was the residence of the Libyan ambassador to the United Nations." In fact, the Libyan government had owned the property for over 17 years by the time the Rabbi moved in next door.

Libya was still on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2000 and the U.S. had no diplomatic relations with that country. This state of affairs had much to do with the decades' long behavior of Libya's murderous dictator Mommar Kaddafi, including Kaddafi's responsibility for the horrific 1988 deaths of 270 innocent American and other civilians, including 33 New Jerseyans on Pan Am Flight 103, that were caused by Libyan agents. Nonetheless, Rabbi Boteach bought the house next door to the Libyan UN Ambassador's in 2000.

My first involvement in the Englewood Libyan matter began at the end of November of 1982, when I learned that the Libyan government, without my knowledge, or the knowledge of the previous Mayor or Councilmembers, bought a mansion on Englewood's East Hill for its Ambassador to the United Nations.

I had just been elected as Mayor of Englewood on November 2, 1982 and was to be sworn in on January 4, 1983. As the new mayor, what I wanted to prevent at all costs, was the Libyan dictator, Colonel Mommar Kaddafi, from spending any time in Englewood or, even worse, taking up residence in our community. Englewood is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic and economically diverse community, just 20 minutes from Manhattan. Questions of nationality, race or religion were and are irrelevant. It was that Libya was a nation which had been a state sponsor of terrorism, with whom the U.S. hadn't had diplomatic relations since 1972, and was run by the madman Kaddafi, who I and most believed then, and now, has the blood of innocent Americans and others on his hands. And the terrible 1988 Lockerbie bombing had not yet occurred.

What concerned

me most was the potential for violence in my little city of 26,000, with less than 80 police officers to handle what could have been deadly confrontations involving thousands of pro and anti-Kaddafi forces. As you can imagine, there was nearly universal and swift objection to the Libyan government's purchase, from almost everyone in town, from all wards and political parties.

At first we

sought to find a way to revoke the sale, but were informed that Libya, as a member of the United Nations since 1955, was entitled to domicile its representative to the UN in the New York City area regardless of the current status of its diplomatic relations with the United States. However, a new law had passed Congress and just been signed by President Reagan in October of 1982, known as the Foreign Missions Act.

It "greatly extended Federal regulations over diplomatic properties"

including a requirement that a foreign government give prior notice to the U.S.

Secretary of State of any intention to purchase U.S. real estate. No such

notice had been given. But the brand new law had never been used. So I went to Washington and met with members of the Reagan Administration at the State Department to encourage them to do so.

Fortunately,

President Reagan's State Department agreed with me that the new Foreign Missions Act applied and they entered into a back channel negotiation with the Libyans (keep in mind that the U.S. had no formal diplomatic relations with the Libyan government at that time). This negotiation resulted in an informal Understanding that the Englewood property would only be used as the personal residence of the Libyan ambassador to the UN and his/her immediate family. Neither Kaddafi nor any other person would be permitted to use the house, without the advanced approval of the U.S. Secretary of State.

The people of

Englewood were relieved when they learned of this Understanding between the two governments. And as hot issues often do,

this one cooled and faded into the background for nearly 27 years. The US-Libya Englewood Understanding has been observed by all, without violation---and without Kaddafi ever setting foot in Englewood.

In June of 2006, President

George W. Bush removed Libya from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, reestablished diplomatic relations with that country, and was referring to Gaddafi's Libya as a valued and trusted "partner" in the U.S.'s War on Terrorism. President Bush even opened a new American embassy in Tripoli, Libya in 2006.

I first learned of the rumors

of Kaddafi coming to Englewood and taking up residence at the Libyan UN Ambassador's house--in anticipation of the September 2009 opening ceremony of the UN General Assembly-- on August 22, 2009. A third party directed me to Rabbi Boteach's column on this subject that had appeared in the August 20, 2009 edition of The Jerusalem Post. While the Rabbi and I had met several times on various occasions, and I was his Congressman, he had not called or contacted me, my staff, the U.S. State Department or any other federal official as far as I know, to speak of this matter before the appearance of his August 20, 2009 newspaper piece.

After

I was made aware of Kaddafi's interest in residing in Englewood for the opening of the UN General Assembly, and perhaps longer, I immediately contacted the Obama White House, State Department and representatives of the Libyan government in Washington, D.C. Over the course of the next six days and nights, I was able to persuade the U.S. and Libyan governments to reaffirm, on August 28, 2009, the 1983 Understanding made between the Reagan Administration and the Libyan government limiting the use of the Libyans' Englewood property keeping Kaddafi from Englewood, and restricting the mansion's use to serve only as a residence for Libya's UN Ambassador and his/her family. That is why Kaddafi never set foot in Englewood in September 2009 when he came to New York City to address the UN General Assembly.

The official U.S. State

Department statement, dated August 28, 2009, concerning the then impending visit of Col. Kaddafi to the U.S. to attend the September opening of the U.N., read: "In keeping with prior arrangements [the 1983 U.S.-Libya Understanding] the Englewood, New Jersey property is not available for any use in connection with the coming visit."

In the August 29, 2009 edition of The Huffington Post, Rabbi Boteach was kind enough to say "We are extremely grateful to our Congressman, Steve Rothman, for his strong and tireless efforts to keep Kaddafi out of Englewood." I was also very moved when the Rabbi reiterated his gratitude to me several more times in public and in private.

However, in his December 21, 2009 Huffington Post piece, Rabbi Boteach was extremely critical of me and all U.S. officials for not evicting the Libyan UN Ambassador from Englewood, despite the limitations of the law, and the fact that the Rabbi had purchased his Englewood home in 2000 knowing of the Libyan government's ownership of the 5-acre adjoining property as the residence of its UN Ambassador.

Mommar Kaddafi is still, and has always been in my mind and many others', a madman with the blood of innocent Americans and others on his hands. However, we have been able to keep him out of Englewood now for 27 years and counting - despite his government's ownership of the Englewood property!